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FM AMEMBASSY RABAT  
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INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 3136  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3488  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 5877  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 4891  
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3817

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000039

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/09/2018

TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: LEADER OF NEW ISLAMIST PARTY WARNS AGAINST  
EMPOWERING EXTREMISTS BY MARGINALIZING MODERATES

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp, for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A new Islamist party, the Party of Renaissance and Virtue (PRV), competed for the first time in Morocco's legislative elections in September 2007. Though the party garnered just below 1 percent of the national vote, a Casablancon imam representing the PRV won a lower house seat for the party, becoming the only cleric in parliament. The PRV's Secretary-General recently argued to us that his party, along with the (much larger) Islamist PJD from which it spun off, enrich the national political debate and attract those otherwise alienated from the political system. He warned that the GOM's apparent policy of marginalizing and containing moderate Islamists would work in the favor of extremists. The PRV's split from the PJD reflects the fissiparous nature of the Moroccan political system. End summary.

¶2. (C) The (Islamist) Party of Renaissance and Virtue (PRV), established in late 2005, took 36,781 votes in the 2007 legislative elections. Though only 0.8 percent of the total national vote, PRV candidate Abdelbarri' Zamzami won a seat in the lower house, representing the upmarket Anfa constituency in Casablanca. Zamzami thus became the only Imam (prayer leader) in the Moroccan Parliament. In (separate) meetings in December, newly minted MP Zamzami and PRV Secretary-General Mohammed Khalidi each stressed to us that their differences with the Justice and Development Party (PJD), Morocco's largest Islamist party, with 46 seats in parliament, were not ideological but rather based on personality clashes with members of the PJD leadership.

¶3. (C) Party leader Khalidi, a clean-shaven and avuncular figure who had been a founding member of the PJD, argued that the emergence of the PRV augmented rather than fractured Islamic politics in Morocco, offering religiously-minded voters more alternatives. The PRV aimed to attract voters who would otherwise stay away from the polls, disillusioned by professional politicians perceived as corrupt and disconnected from the citizenry.

¶4. (C) Khalidi cautioned secularists against rejoicing in the PJD's disappointing recent electoral performance. The more groups like the PJD and PRV are brought into the system and allowed a seat at the table, the more extreme fringes of the Islamist movement are undermined and marginalized, he contended. Constructive engagement rather than containment was the approach the GOM should be taking toward Moroccan Islamists, Khalidi argued.

¶5. (C) The GOM should be exerting greater efforts to encourage Islamists to participate in government and allowing

them opportunities to take up positions of responsibility. The more that "mainstream" Islamists are marginalized, and political institutions remain mired in their current stagnation, the greater the danger of empowering violent jihadists, he warned. He boasted that he had personally persuaded a number of Salafists who had previously been inclined to extreme positions to join the PRV and work for change through democratic means.

¶6. (C) The low participation, vote buying, and paid vote suppression which had marred the 2007 elections appeared to vindicate the position of Al-Adl wal-Ihsan (The Justice and Spirituality Organization - often mistakenly called the Justice and Chairty Organization (JCO)) against electoral participation as legitimating a corrupt system, Khalidi argued. Though voicing differences with Al-Adl, terming them "extreme," Khalidi nonetheless believed the GOM should work to incorporate them into national political life rather than keep them isolated and contained.

¶7. (C) During a December meeting with D/Polcouns, PRV MP Zamzami acknowledged that his success in the race for the seat in Anfa was likely based on his appeal as a straight talking and outwardly pious man, a favorable contrast to the professional politicians from established parties, generally perceived as corrupt and self-interested. Exceedingly modest and soft-spoken in our discussion, Zamzami previously had a reputation for holding hard-line Islamist attitudes.

¶8. (C) Zamzami was dismissed from his position with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs following the 1997 appointment of Socialist Prime Minister Abdelrahman El-Youssefi. Zamzami had long been at odds with Moroccan leftists, reportedly once

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publicly denounced them as "kuffar" (infidels). As a cleric, Zamzami had also infuriated leftists by refusing to acknowledge leftist icon El-Mehdi Ben Barka as a martyr (Exiled to Paris, Ben Barka disappeared in the mid-1960's, widely presumed to have been assassinated, possibly by agents of King Hassan II).

¶9. (C) Our conversation with Zamzami revealed little hint of fiery Islamist zeal. His top and overriding priority, he explained, was improving conditions for his poor constituents, of whom there is no shortage even in the relatively affluent Anfa district he represents. In parliament for barely two months, Zamzami candidly admitted that he understood little of the institution's workings and would need time to become an effective legislator. His most immediate challenge was isolation: He has not been invited to join any of the existing parliamentary blocs. Under Morocco's rules of parliamentary procedure, bloc membership is prerequisite for an MP to join a committee and even to address the floor.

¶10. (C) Comment: Khalidi's assertion that the PRV will complement the PJD and enrich the political landscape in Islamist circles is open to question. The split reflects the fissiparous nature of Moroccan politics, a characteristic apparently encouraged by the Palace, seen to prefer weak and divided political party landscape. The PRV's very modest, though not insignificant, performance in September 2007 underscores that the party has a long road to travel before it can be considered a genuine rival to the PJD. The moderate and pragmatic tone of PRV leaders does add weight to their arguments that engaging rather than containing mainstream Islamists is the better way for states like Morocco to defend against the spread of extremist Islamist ideology. End comment.

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